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Three Legends of Northwestern California

LYNWOOD CARRANCO

NORTHWESTERN CALIFORNIA—specifically the Humboldt Bay region—was long one of the most isolated in the West, and even today it is by no means the best known. Its exploration was curiously delayed. This region did not become known to the world in any detail until long after more accessible regions, north and south, had been crossed and recrossed, hunted and trapped over, surveyed and mapped and settled. Extremely rough country, dense forests, deep rivers racing through precipitous canyons, a lack of natural passes, and a warlike Indian population—all combined to turn back the cautious and to defeat the effort of any but the most persistent and bold frontiersmen. The exploration of this region was the familiar drama of the conquest of the wilderness, but played under conditions of great difficulty.

This rugged country was among the last regions in the United States to be explored. Humboldt Bay was not explored until the end of 1848—when San Francisco, less than 300 miles to the south, was already a city of 20,000. Three popular legends that originated in this area and are popularly believed to have a historical base are the following: (1) The Kings Peak Legend, (2) The Lost Cabin Legend, and (3) The Bigfoot Legend.

According to the Kings Peak legend, there is supposed to be a hidden treasure of gold and other valuables in a cave (**N512**) on Kings Peak in southwestern Humboldt County. Kings Peak is approximately ten miles above Shelter Cove and about thirty miles below Cape Mendocino on the coast. It is a rugged mountain with steep ridges which extend to a height of more than 4,500 feet, and is almost unknown since many attempts to survey it have failed. The mountain is a mass of slides. The high points which are of shale rock are continuously sliding off into the canyon below.[1]

There are variations of the Kings Peak legend. One popular version states that a galleon was wrecked on the coast near Kings Peak, and that all those who were aboard were drowned. Another version states that the Indians killed the survivors. The Indians salvaged the valuable cargo of gold, gems, spices, and other goods and carried their loot to a cave in Kings Peak. Years later there was an earthquake which sealed the opening of the cave forever.

[1] Andrew Genzoli, Eureka *Humboldt Times*, October 5, 1958.

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The Mattole Indians have repeated the story through generations, and it is now part of the folklore of the area.[2]

The first of the Manila galleons crossed the Pacific in 1565, and the last galleon put into port in 1815.[3] Yearly for the two and a half centuries that lay between the two dates, the galleons made the long and lonely voyage of five to seven months between Manila in the Philippines and Acapulco in Mexico. As the richest ships in all the oceans, they were the most coveted prize of pirate and privateer. Piracy on the Pacific side of America never reached the proportions that it assumed in the Caribbean, but it did exist. English privateers took four of the galleons.[4]

The Philippines were added to New Spain in 1565, and this acquisition brought about a renewed interest in California. It was not until 1763 that a direct contact with Manila began. The Manila-bound galleons, carrying huge quantities of silver coin, headed straight out to sea from Acapulco and turned westward in the latitude of 12 degrees or 13 degrees.[5] Leaving the Philippines, the galleons followed the great circle route, northeast toward Japan, east toward the California coast on the Japanese current, and south following the California coast to Acapulco.

Silks, wax, chinaware, spices, and other eastern staples were the principal items involved. The trade assumed such great proportions that merchants in Spain protested to the court that they were losing the market of New Spain. The king obliged the merchants by restricting the Mexican-Philippine trade to a single 500-ton vessel each year, with a cargo not to exceed 250,000 pesos in value.[6]

Annually, until almost the very end of the Spanish colonial period, the Manila galleon in making its coastward trip, closely followed the California coast from Cape Mendocino, usually the first landmark, to the tip of Baja California. Landings were infrequent, but for almost two centuries the California coast was the one regular contact that the Spaniards had with the California region. Some of the galleons were used for exploration of the California coast, notably the one of 1595, commanded by Cermeño.

On the east-bound trip there were two courses open to the galleons when signs of land were discovered. These signs, the fungous growth on the ocean, were usually sighted about 300 miles from shore. The first course was to continue directly ahead until land was sighted before changing direction; the

[2] Andrew Genzoli, columnist of the *Humboldt Times* and a foremost authority on Humboldt County history, said that Johnny Jack, a Mattole and Wiyot Indian who lived at the mouth of the Mattole River, told him the story when he was a youngster.

[3] William L. Schurz, *The Manila Galleon*, p. 15.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Peter Gerhard, *Pirates on the West Coast of New Spain*, p. 54.

[6] John W. Caughey, *California*, p. 56.

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other course was to turn to the southeast and to reach land in the area of Lower California. The former was the usual procedure in the early history of the line, and the other route was generally followed in the eighteenth century. A convenient and customary point for demarcation in the early times was the headland of Cape Mendocino.[7]

As a rule the galleons did not venture too close to the rugged California coast for fear of being shipwrecked. A further deterrent to familiarity with the northern coast was the dense fog that often hung over the land, concealing possible reefs and headlands. The galleons *Espíritu Santo* and *Jesús María* narrowly escaped being shipwrecked near Cape Mendocino in 1604.[8]

During the history of the line, more than thirty galleons were lost, thousands of lives were lost, and over sixty million pesos of money and merchandise disappeared with the galleons.[9] There is no evidence that a galleon was wrecked on or near Cape Mendocino, but it certainly could have happened. Urns of doubtful origin have been found at sea by commercial fishermen off shore, and large pieces of wax have also been found along the coast north of Cape Mendocino. Could these items have come from a wrecked galleon? This evidence has kept the legend alive through the years.

The two versions of the Lost Cabin legend have been colorful and exciting —even though there have been no clues in the last hundred years. This romantic legend is centered in Del Norte County and the county seat of Crescent City. In 1849 and 1850, a story was circulated throughout the Pacific Coast and as far away as the East Coast—a story that even rivaled the legend of Captain Kidd's treasure.

According to one version of the story, a miner, in the early days of the mining excitement in California, crossed the Coast Range Mountains and prospected the gulches and ravines of the foothills near the ocean. One day he struck it rich and found much gold (**N596**). He then built a cabin in the wilderness so that he could accumulate a fortune and then return East to his home and friends.

The lonely miner worked day after day for many months, adding to his hoard of gold until there was a small fortune. One day he was suddenly attacked by Indians. They left him unconscious, thinking that he was dead. The Indians could not find the well-hidden treasure, so they set fire to his cabin, burning it to ashes. When they had gone, the miner recovered consciousness, but his reasoning powers were gone. He wandered out of the forest to civilization. He later succeeded in reaching his home in the East where he died. It is not known how he finally reached the East, but before his death,

[7] Schurz, p. 239.
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 240.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 256.

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his mind became normal and he called his friends to him. He told them the story of the hidden treasure and described the area in which the cabin was located. The Lost Cabin was supposed to be somewhere on the northern coast of California, specifically in the French Hill area of Del Norte County.[10]

In 1891 the local Humboldt County newspapers carried the news that a Judge Loveland of Eureka and the Peugh Brothers of Table Bluff had located the famous "diggins" of the Lost Cabin. In answer to the newspaper accounts, J. E. Eldredge, the editor of the *Del Norte Record,* replied that they had not discovered the Lost Cabin mine. The following is his version of the legend.[11]

The first person who went in search of the gold, according to Eldredge, happened to be Colonel C. Hall, a close friend of the Eldredge family. In the year 1849, Colonel Hall crossed the plains from Missouri to California in search of gold. He came to Trinidad in 1852. While he was there, three men came down from the mountains. One of the men, Vermile Thompson, was an old acquaintance of his from Missouri. After the usual greetings, Thompson produced a large quantity of gold dust and nuggets and told him where the gold had been found, and that there was plenty left at the place of mining. The men had three pack mules loaded with gold dust. Thompson said that they had built a cabin in which they had left their tools. Papers were in the cabin with full instructions where the mine was located. Colonel Hall became interested. He believed his friend, and he obtained from him a sketch of the country and the location of the cabin, from which could be heard the ocean's roar. The three men left immediately for the East.

Hall organized a party and started in search of the rich "diggins." The party followed the coast and spent a summer in fruitless search. The story spread, and soon there were many parties from all parts of the country in search of the Lost Cabin mine.

Hall became discouraged and returned to his native state in 1854. In 1855 he returned with his family and settled in Crescent City where he remained for some years. Later he moved to Lakeport where he met Thompson who had also come west to settle. Thompson refused to talk again about the Lost Cabin mine.

The search for the Lost Cabin mine brought about the founding of Crescent City. In the spring of 1851, a party under Captain McDermott was searching for the Lost Cabin in the vicinity of what is now known as French Hill.[12] From the top they saw the curve in the coastline and they thought that

[10] This version of the story is found in the *Shasta Courier* for June, 1858. A. J. Bledsoe in *Indian Wars of the Northwest* (1885, pp. 137-138) tells the same story with some slight variations.

[11] J. E. Eldredge, Crescent City *Del Norte Record,* January 18, 1883. L. W. Musick in his book, *The Hermit of Siskiyou* (1896), also quotes the J. E. Eldredge story.

[12] Bledsoe, p. 138.

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it was a large bay. Because of this discovery, another party in 1852 proceeded in search of the harbor. The party, headed by Captain Bell, arrived at the beach and named the harbor Paragon Bay. A messenger was sent to San Francisco, and an expedition was soon organized which later resulted in the founding of the town of Crescent City.[13]

No trace has ever been found of the Lost Cabin mine—if there is such a mine—but many people have searched for the gold since 1848. And the treasure is still waiting for the lucky person.

The Bigfoot legend (**F517.1**; **F551**) literally exploded recently into one of international interest. This legend, which can be traced back to 1850 by the local Indians, became popular again in 1958 when Mr. Andrew Genzoli, columnist and historian for the Eureka *Humboldt Times,* published a letter in his column about the presence of a big-footed individual in the uninhabited Bluff Creek area of the mountainous inland country of Humboldt County.

Mrs. Jesse Bemis, wife of one of the road crew working on a timber access road in the uninhabited area, wrote to Mr. Genzoli in September of 1948 about the existence of a wild man. This creature was given the name of Bigfoot, since he had left his huge tracks in the area. Jerry Crew, a tractor driver on the road job, brought in to Eureka a plaster-of-Paris cast that he had made of the big track. Mr. Genzoli published the story on the front page with a photograph of Jerry Crew holding a huge plaster foot sixteen inches in length and seven inches in width.[14]

The story was put on the wires of the Associated Press and almost every paper in the country printed the story, while inquiries came in from abroad. Since then numerous expeditions have ventured into the Bigfoot country, and at least two have been conducted on a scientific basis.

Ivan Sanderson, famous zoologist and writer, accompanied by two other scientists, traveled into the mountainous country, looking for Bigfoot. Sanderson used the information about Bigfoot for a magazine article and for part of a book. The magazine article, "The Strange Story of America's Abominable Snowman," which was printed in the December, 1959, issue of *True* magazine, was told in a sensational manner with many inaccuracies. Mr. Sanderson wired Mr. Genzoli the following day when he saw the prepublication copy: "Have just seen prepublication copies of my article . . . am utterly disgusted . . . distortion and unauthorized insertions that I did not write."[15]

Sanderson did a better job of telling the story of Bigfoot in his book, *Abominable Snowmen: Legend Come to Life,* although there were still in-

[13] *Ibid.,* p. 139.
[14] Andrew Genzoli, *Humboldt Times,* October 5, 1958.
[15] *Humboldt Times,* November 22, 1959.

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accuracies. There is a false story of a pack of dogs being killed by what was believed to have been Bigfoot. Much credit is given to a Ray Wallace, who since appears to know even less about the Bigfoot story than other people concerned in the incidents. Most of Sanderson's material was taken from Mr. Genzoli's writings on Bigfoot in the *Humboldt Times.*

Another scientific expedition was conducted by Tom Slick of San Antonio, Texas, who heads research organizations. Slick and Kirk Johnson had sponsored two expeditions to the Himalayas in search of the Abominable Snowman. A suspected relationship between Bigfoot of Bluff Creek and the Abominable Snowman of the Himalayas was thought to exist.[16] This expedition under Peter Byrne has been secretive to discourage ousiders from coming into the area.

On a camping trip in 1960, Dr. Charles Johnson, an orthopedic surgeon, accompanied by his family and a friend, reported that they had discovered tracks sixteen to eighteen inches in length in their camp. Dr. Johnson reported that the prints were human feet with huge toes, and that the step measured from three and a half to four feet.[17]

Later in the same year Bigfoot broke into the headlines of the San Jose newspapers. Dr. Maurice Tripp, geologist and geophysicist, took photographs of a seventeen-inch footprint that he found in the Bluff Creek area. He indicated the weight of the "huge puppy" to have been more than 800 pounds.[18]

Other stories of persons finding huge tracks have been published since 1960. Over the past three years Mr. Genzoli has received about a thousand letters concerning Bigfoot. These letters have come from children, adults, hunters, scientists, writers, explorers, and the curious. Bigfoot still roams the inland country eluding those who try to capture him, although he has been kind enough to leave his oversized tracks.

Bigfoot, the legendary creature, has been observed over a greater part of the Humboldt and Del Norte and Siskiyou areas. The legend is an old one in the culture of the local Indians. They say that the large, hairy half-human creatures have roamed the hills since the beginning of time.

In 1896 L. W. Musick published a book in verse form from the office of the *Crescent City News* called *The Hermit of Siskiyou* to "aid in the perpetration of some of the quaint legends that have become in a degree historical of the region represented. . . ."[19]

In his poem he describes the Hermit or someone who appears to resemble Bigfoot:

[16] *Ibid.,* January 10, 1960.
[17] Eureka *Humboldt Standard,* June 23, 1960.
[18] *Humboldt Times,* October 11, 1960.
[19] Musick, p. i.

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You may have heard the story, too
Of how upon Mount Siskiyou,
Was seen an ape, or spook, or tramp,
In region near to Happy Camp—

Some years gone by—
That was of stature taller than
The ordinary height of man—
Who fed on berries, roots and brouse,
Nor, of abode, had tent or house,

And from whose eye
There gleamed the fierceness of the beast
That, thwarted of voracious feast,
With sulleness, feigns to retire
Far in the jungle, to his lair;
Though loiters near his wanted prey
Till enemy hath gone away.[20]

In an appendix note Mr. Musick explained that this part of his poem was based on a story which appeared in the *Del Norte Record* of January 2, 1886. The story was written by a correspondent from Happy Camp in Siskiyou County:

I do not remember to have seen any reference to the 'Wild Man' which haunts this part of the country, so I shall allude to him briefly. Not a great while since, Mr. Jack Dover, one of our most trustworthy citizens, while hunting saw an object standing one hundred and fifty yards from him picking berries or tender shoots from the bushes. The thing was of gigantic size—about seven feet high—with a bull-dog head, short ears and long hair; it was also furnished with a beard, and was free from hair on such parts of its body as is common among men. Its voice was shrill, or soprano, and very human, like that of a woman in great fear. Mr. Dover could not see its footprints as it walked on hard soil. He aimed his gun at the animal, or whatever it is, several times, but because it was so human would not shoot. The range of the curiosity is between Marble Mountain and the vicinity of Happy Camp. A number of people have seen it and all agree in their descriptions except that some make it taller than others. It is apparently herbivorous and makes winter quarters in some of the caves of Marble Mountains.[21]

Thus the legend of Bigfoot has become a symbol of the vast primitive wilderness of Northwestern California where Nature reigns supreme, and he has also become part of the history of Humboldt County and perhaps the world. Bigfoot has remained hidden for thousands of years, and let us hope that he remains hidden for thousands of years to come.

Humboldt State College

[20] Musick, pp. 37-38.

[21] Musick, pp. 79-80. This book was loaned to the writer by Mrs. Lee English of Brookings, Oregon.

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